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John le Carré In the House Of Lies

A PERFECT SPY
By John le Carré
Knopf. 475 pp. $18.95

By Bob Woodward

JOHN LE CARRE's rightful position as the premier spy novelist of modern time is rooted in his various previous portraits of complex deceptions: MI6 versus KGB, East versus West. Now in his latest novel, *A Perfect Spy*, though on seemingly familiar turf, the master has veered away from the snares one intelligence service lays for another to the personal betrayals of family, marriage and human relations.

Brilliantly written and constructed, even sensual, always evocative, this new le Carré is likely to infuriate many of his fans simply because there is too little of the spy's tradecraft, only fleeting mention and attention given to dirty tricks, reading of mail, the codes, tunnels, Joes (agents), wiretaps, burnboxes, forging and recruiting.

At the novel's beginning, Magnus Pym, the British intelligence service's station chief in Vienna, has disappeared and gone into hiding to write his own account of his life and career, to unravel it all. He's a spy, but his compulsions are deeply personal, related to the events of his childhood, schooling, father, wives and son.

Pym covers his family history in almost tedious detail, as he relates his early years as a spy in Switzerland, and later moving to posts in Germany and the United States. But Pym's real emotional obsession is his relationship to his father, Rick (seeming to parallel le Carré's relationship with his own father). Little happens in this novel without reference to Rick, undoubtedly one of the great comic creations in the le Carré gallery. But Rick is not a spy, just a confidence man who leaves a trail of scams and thievery across England, including selling his own brain at his own funeral.

The novel unexpectedly resembles a court of law in which Pym puts himself, his family, intimates and colleagues on the witness stand. It's a dangerous psychoanalytical endgame, with the marvelously charming, worldly Pym playing both doctor and patient.

In many respects *A Perfect Spy* can be read as an attack—a somewhat savage attack even—on the intelligence trade, which emerges in these pages as bereft of what it says it holds most dear: gravity, seriousness of purpose, loyalty, secrets, true national security. As for human relationships in this world, they are faltering and damned, everyone of them, says le Carré. It could be that Pym doesn't even know for sure what side he's on. There's no hero here, no George Smiley.

LE CARRE seems to be saying there is no honor and there are no honorable men. Freedom fighters or contras (take your pick) can fall apart after so much work, the secret funds will dry up or be dried up, the prized defector will go back home, he fed our side only lies, the tables will turn, some dummy down in communications will sell out the crown-jewel code list to the other side for the price of a mid-sized Mercedes. The intelligence operative, even the best, gets soul-fried and brain-fried for his his trouble and his life's work. It is a world without proof and too much success is really only another form of failure.

It is a bleak message, heralded in *A Perfect Spy's* somber opening scene:

"In the small hours of a blustery October morning in a south Devon coastal town that seemed to have been deserted by its inhabitants, Magnus Pym got out of his elderly country taxi-cab."

Pym knows as all good agents do, that everyone talks, that eventually there are no secrets. So he has been saving up his entire life, protecting himself from blabbing, having erected a monumental house of lies. To speak once from the heart, to speak the truth will be to bring it all down, to undo the whole game.

It is a twilight world where nothing is as it seems, where each encounter poses a riddle. Pym's colleague in British intelligence—what is called "the Firm"—sees this at once, bursting out in protest and pounding the table when Pym is accused of treason. "Stop this *now*. There's not a man or woman in this room who won't look like a traitor once you start to pull our life stories inside out. A man can't remember where he was on the night of the tenth? Then he's lying. He *can* remember? Then he's too damn flip with his alibi. You go one more yard with this and everyone who tells the truth will become a barefaced liar, everyone who does a decent job will be working for the other side. You carry on like this and you'll sink our service better than the Russians ever could. Or is that what you want?"

In Pym, John le Carré has taken one of the great writing risks—the creation of an unsympathetic hero. Pym lives the greatest, most uncheckable deception of all: self-deception. The novel does not completely work, though Pym's childhood unfolds with a wonderful sense of irony and mockery, equaling anything in le Carré's previous books.

I came away from *A Perfect Spy* perplexed. Too much of it reads like an oblique, hidden-hand indictment of British espionage. Too much of it —the father connection—is an exercise that doesn't quite pay off. The rich aftertaste of, say, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* is missing. Le Carré is reaching out in his fiction and one must honor him for his bold, thoughtful effort. Yet in the end this perfect spy escapes from his creator. ■

Bob Woodward, an assistant managing editor of The Washington Post, is writing a book about the Central Intelligence Agency.